

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Witness Testimony

Testimony of
Commissioner Doug Robertson
Douglas County, Oregon
Before the
House Resources
Subcommittee on
Forests and Forest
Health

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Thank you Madame Chairman:

My name is Doug Robertson. I am Chairman of the Douglas County Board of Commissioners in Western Oregon and President of the Association of Oregon and California Revested Railroad Grant Land Counties, more commonly known as the O & C Counties in Oregon. Battles have raged in our region for years over spotted owls, marbled murrelets, salmon and many other creatures. While these debates were earnestly engaged and fought over by environmental groups, industry and the administration, the problem is that after the battle, most of these groups packed up and went home but our counties were left to deal with the consequences. In an effort to address these issues, the Administration designed a strategy which we know today as the Northwest Forest Plan.

The Northwest Forest Plan ("NFP") was drafted to seek relief from a federal court injunction that stopped all industrial activity in the "owl region." The Administration and Congress had already correctly determined that any plan that would be sufficient to avoid continuous court injunctions would bring counties in western Oregon, Washington and Northern California to their knees financially, and in fact, bankrupt many of them.

In addressing this anticipated undesirable outcome, Congress and the Administration included in the 1993 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act safety net payments to the counties affected by the spotted owl dispute.

The idea was simple: Safety net payments would be made to affected counties for a ten year period on a declining scale, thus providing time for the implementation of the NFP along with it's guarantees from the Administration. These guarantees were: (1) to stop the legal gridlock that paralyzed the management process on federal forest lands; (2) to provide a steady and predicable flow of timber to stabilize the employment base and economy of impacted communities; (3) to coordinate the actions of federal agencies to insure environmental restrictions and regulations were upheld; and finally, (4) to provide support for counties, communities and people directly impacted by the policies embedded in the NFP. Unfortunately, these guarantees have not been realized and in fact, the implementation of the plan has created more in the way of uncertainty, than stability or solutions. Moreover, earlier projections of an increase in value of harvested timber have not materialized in part because of the low quality of sales offered, and because of the ever increasing level of lumber imported from foreign sources flooding our markets. None of the original assumptions behind a transition away from the current safety net have been fully realized.

Counties that have historically survived as a result of management on the federal lands within their boundaries are caught in the cross-fire. While the debates about harvest levels, sustainable ecosystem, fire salvage, etc., rage on, the counties are facing economic ruin as the safety net continues to decline and its scheduled termination in 2003 looms in the future. While a permanent solution is desirable, an extension of the safety net and its attendant principles is an absolute necessity. If we cannot solve all of our problems at once, we should at least solve the most immediate problem we face, which is financial collapse for some counties after 2003.

Mr. Chairman, the debate about how best to manage these federal lands will continue. There will be disagreements among well meaning advocates on both sides, but there is one thing about which there is no disagreement; counties are in desperate need of, at the very least, an extension of the existing safety net so we can continue providing the financial resources that support libraries, law enforcement, public health and other social services, education, road systems and countless other services that are the very fiber that holds together the counties, communities and cities in which we live.

It is the policy of my County, and of the Association of O & C Counties, to seek a halt to the rapid decline in safety net payments in the owl region, to extend that safety net, and to advocate for the creation of a similar program for counties and schools nationwide that are dependent on shared revenues from the National Forests. While perhaps not as drastically as in the northwest, counties and schools across the nation have suffered serious financial harm from the change in management priorities on our federal forest lands. We appreciate the interest shown by this Committee in helping remedy the problems we face.

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